

## A Long Road to Open Eyes

Bruno Romazzotti

Bruno Romazzotti has a Masters degree in Law with a specialisation in the Sociology of Rights and Human Relationships. He has been a full-time member of the International Movement ATD Fourth World volunteer corps since June 1987. He assisted in the preparation of 17 October 1987, the first World Day for Overcoming Extreme Poverty. He then worked for the quarterly journal revue *Quart Monde* for one year before joining the A TD Fourth World team in Luxembourg. In 1990, he joined the ATD Fourth World international relations team where he has been its representative to the United Nations in Geneva since 1993. Mr. Romazzotti is married and has four children.

Quarrels between governments take little note of human suffering. And yet, they can recede. giving an opportunity to the persistency of people pushed to action by this suffering

The *Final Report on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13)* by Leandro Despouy demonstrates. through the lives, the experiences and the thoughts of the poorest themselves, that extreme poverty gives rise to a veritable denial of human rights. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights adopted this report in its resolution 1997/11. The Commission, which since 1989 has affirmed that extreme poverty and social exclusion are violations of human dignity, has become aware of the importance and innovation of this report which was written in partnership with the poorest and non-governmental organisations committed to them over the long-term. That is why the Commission asked that this report be published and diffused as widely as possible. Recognising the innovation and the value of the step taken by its Special Rapporteur, it also asked the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to pursue this experiment. This resolution, sponsored by 66 countries, was adopted by consensus on 3 April 1997 and is the culmination of a 10 year history.

It was in 1987 that Fr. Joseph Wresinski addressed the Commission on Human Rights. Through the example of a European family, he described how enduring one difficulty after another, ail of which mire a life in poverty, prevents an individual from enjoying the rights recognised by the Charter of Human Rights. Boistered by this analysis of extreme poverty as a denial of human rights, he then asked the Commission to conduct a study - in collaboration with the very poor, and in the framework of the interdependence and the indivisibility of human rights - examining whether or not individuals and human groups living in extreme poverty may enjoy their rights. After making this statement in Geneva, Fr. Wresinski then met with representatives of several governmental delegations. He entrusted them with the mission of mandating such a study. Several of them personally took this mission to heart.

The following year in 1988, the International Movement A TD Fourth World was not able to attend the Commission's session because Fr. Wresinski died on its opening day. Nevertheless, one of the diplomats he had met the previous year, Mr. Leandro Despouy, then the Argentinean Ambassador, circulated a resolution to carry out Fr. Wresinski's proposal. This draft document was eventually withdrawn due to pressure from Western countries and the reservations of certain developing countries.

## Why This Opposition ?

In 1988, international policy was still shaped by blocs. In the arena of human rights, this East-West tension played out through confrontation on the pre-eminence of certain categories of rights. The Eastern-bloc countries considered it essential to ensure the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights before being able to make civil and political rights available. As for the Western countries, they held that the establishment of a state guaranteeing the full enjoyment of

civil and political rights was an indispensable prerequisite before turning to economic, social and cultural rights.

In other words, affirming that extreme poverty is a violation of all human rights jeopardised the Western theory of priority accorded to civil and political rights. Furthermore, without denying that extreme poverty may have an impact on the enjoyment of human rights, certain developing countries feared that a resolution confirming this would be turned against them, adding to the attacks of which they felt themselves victims in the area of civil and political rights. As for the countries of Eastern Europe, extreme poverty gave them an argument to point out the awkwardness of the Western vision of human rights. However, they remained reserved because this new affirmation also endangered their vision of the primacy of economic, social and cultural rights. Thus, without support in the face of numerous objections, Argentina withdrew its draft resolution. Nonetheless, the attempt allowed the question to be kept in mind.

In 1989, France took-up this issue, namely because a member of the delegation, compelled by Fr. Wresinski's arguments, convinced his delegation that this theme also offered an opportunity to France to take a foothold in the arena of economic, social and cultural rights, something it had worked toward for several years. France and Argentina joined forces, in collaboration with the International Movement ATD Fourth World, to obtain a text that could be adopted by consensus. In all subsequent years, resolutions on extreme poverty and human rights continued to be adopted by consensus without requiring a vote.

There were many hesitations to overcome. First came the question of reassuring the developing countries that, in no instance, was such a resolution intended worsen the attacks against some of them on the question of human rights. Concerning Western countries, it was necessary to leave behind the ideological debate of the era and the imposition of hierarchies on human rights. The Eastern-bloc countries, on account of the emphasis on economic, social and cultural rights, did accept to support the resolution, encouraged by the fact that the Soviet Union became a co-author. However, this last fact did not help improve the feelings of a number of Western countries.

To obtain a consensus, it was necessary for the authors, while noting that extreme poverty encroaches on the enjoyment of political and civil rights, to put the stress on economic, social and cultural rights. This resolution, the first of a long series, was finally adopted by consensus. However, certain governments, particularly those of the United States and Japan, expressed strong reservations. Thanks to significant efforts by France, the United States did allow the resolution to pass without calling for a vote. Nevertheless, during the debates and in their statement at the moment of the adoption of this resolution, the United States continued to express strong criticism of its content. They maintained that the question of extreme poverty should not be dealt with by human rights bodies because it is purely a social and economic question. This reservation and this criticism were expressed for many years by various industrialised countries. They remain present, even today, for a small number among them. However, it should be noted that as early as 1989, there was a split among the Western countries, five of which added their names to the French-sponsored resolution.

Several developing countries, representing all geographic regions, have supported this approach to human rights since 1989. However the majority of them remain wary, waiting for their fears of condemnation to be confirmed or disproved. For several years after 1989, it remained difficult to gain further support from governments.

The risk of politicising the debate did not disappear with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Although the East-West split is rapidly fading into the past, other rivalries flared up, notably, the debate between countries of the North and the South concerning the right to development. Certain countries then hoped that the resolutions and the study called for by the Sub-Commission of experts would specify the causes of poverty and notably those which engender an unjust, economic, global order. This would identify the factor governing the non-realisation of the right to development in developing countries. Over the years, however, the attempts to make political

use of the question of extreme poverty and human rights gave way to a real determination better to understand extreme poverty.

## A Consensus

Latin American countries were the first to join the countries supporting this issue. For them, it became obvious that human rights had to be seen in their totality, and that extreme poverty is a tell-tale sign of their indivisibility. Early on, Latin American countries were exalting the right to development, defining it as an individual right as much as a right of a people. The idea that a human right can be a collective right strongly displeases the Western industrialised countries. The United States maintains that this right cannot be provided by governments, but that governments must simply create the conditions necessary so that each person has an equal chance to enjoy his or her right to development. They hold the same reasoning concerning economic, social and cultural rights.

Little-by-little, African countries rallied to support this resolution because they saw that the resolution, and then the study led by the Sub-Commission, broke loose from purely political opposition, and that the procedure of the Special Rapporteur was in no way accusatory concerning these countries.

Asian countries still remain the most cautious geographic group concerning this issue. The exception is the Philippines, which have supported the resolution since 1989. Most Asian countries are convinced that extreme poverty is a violation of human rights. During the preparations for the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, Bangladesh requested that a second paragraph on extreme poverty be added after the one proposed by France. But the North-South opposition in the Commission on Human Rights is giving way to a stand off between Asian and industrialised Western countries. Latin American and African countries have become the arbitrators.

Nevertheless, the Despouy Report and the various resolutions concerning human rights and extreme poverty did overcome the obstacles resulting from the various quarrels which, from year to year, play out in the Commission on Human Rights. The itinerary of the Despouy Report and the resolutions have been guided by a steadfast will to seek out people living in extreme poverty, while steering clear of the political stakes in the scope of extreme poverty's shadow throughout the world.

In the ever shifting sands of the international community, nothing can be considered secured. For example, the word « partner », which described the relationships between people living in extreme poverty and the non-governmental organisations committed to them for the realisation of the study, had to be deleted in 1997. Certain countries had been requesting this deletion for two years, because they feared that this word would open up the United Nations to groups prepared « to profit from the misery of others ». This request came from the continent which had first supported the resolution.

It will always be necessary to learn anew from the poorest how they aspire to peace and recognition. This is our contribution so that the community of Nations will accept to question itself more fully concerning the dignity of all people. The history of this study has shown that, despite the vicissitudes of its agenda, the Commission on Human Rights also aspires to serve an enduring peace.